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ABSTRACT

On May 6-7, 2000, the Foreign Policy Research Institute's (FPRI's) sixth History Institute convened with more than 40 high school and college history teachers to seek answers to the question: "How should we teach the history of the Vietnam War to our children today?" Not surprisingly, no simple answers were forthcoming. This conference report explains that from the complex portraits of diplomacy, Cold War grand strategy, and electoral politics emerged a larger picture of the war that provided teachers with new perspectives and numerous provocative techniques to help students discover the war for themselves. The report considers the lessons of Vietnam; the origins of the U.S. war in Vietnam; Lyndon Johnson's presidency; Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, and the Paris Accords; protest and two persistent myths about the war; and the diverse perceptions about the Vietnam War. It recommends that teachers expose students to competing perceptions of Vietnam and the war rather than presenting them with hard and fast conclusions. The report discusses the conference presentations and panel discussions. (BT)

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FOOTNOTES

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TEACHING THE VIETNAM WAR: A CONFERENCE REPORT

Stephen Winterstein, Rapporteur

How did the United States get into Vietnam? What was it doing there? What happened at home? How did we get out? What have we learned? For two days, these questions were explored in great depth by some of the country's most renowned authorities on the period. But the question underlying all of them, the real reason for the conference, was deceptively simple: How should we teach the history of the Vietnam War to our children today? More than forty high school and college history teachers from around the country convened on May 6-7 for FPRI's sixth History Institute to craft answers to that question. Unsurprisingly, no simple answers were forthcoming, but from the complex portraits of diplomacy, Cold War grand strategy, and electoral politics emerged a larger picture of the war that provided teachers with new perspectives and numerous provocative techniques to help students discover the war for themselves.

THE LESSONS OF VIETNAM

History teaches us "how to think, not what to do." So concluded George Herring in his keynote lecture on the lessons of Vietnam. Dr. Herring, the Alumni Professor of History at the University of Kentucky and author of several acclaimed works on the Vietnam War, cautioned against misusing history to derive lessons that it is not capable of providing.

Vietnam, as he pointed out, continues to cast a long shadow on every debate over sending U.S. troops into action. But the "lessons" that disputants claim to have learned from Vietnam tend to reflect their personal political predilections. For some, typically on the left, the mistake of Vietnam was to have been involved there at all; for some on the right, the mistake was to lose. Thus, when people seek to avoid "another Vietnam," some of them are calling for the United States to stay out of civil conflicts in foreign cultures, while others insist that when America does intervene, it must do so with decisive force and the assurance of public support.

But "reasoning by analogy," Dr. Herring observed, is almost always misleading, because the analogies often rest on superficial knowledge and debatable premises -- and because history *never* repeats itself. For example, warnings that U.S. involvement in Central America would lead to "another Vietnam" ultimately proved exaggerated. The initially obvious similarities between the cases, including a jungle-based guerrilla war against insurgents, masked more significant differences. And the Weinberger-Powell doctrine (which stipulates that military intervention abroad be undertaken only when the national interest is at stake, objectives are clear and attainable, and the means can be provided to ensure victory) is derived in large part from the unprovable and dubious assumption that unrestricted power would have led to victory in Vietnam and will do so elsewhere in the future. Implicit in these overstated or simplistic pronouncements is an ignorance of fundamental differences that should militate against "one size fits all" historical lessons. Dr. Herring urged skepticism toward any authoritative claims of this sort.

But skepticism need not end in utter agnosticism. Dr. Herring insisted that even if history cannot predict the outcome of stories in today's headlines, it can shed light on how the United States got into Vietnam, what it did there, and why it failed. He drew out three lessons from the war. The first regards the "centrality of local forces." The Cold War, he argued, distorted Americans' perception of local struggles, leading them to discount the internal dynamics at play in Vietnam in favor of the fight against world communism. Second, the war demonstrated the limits of power, indicating that intervention can lead to the pursuit of goals that lie beyond the country's capacity. This should be taken as a warning that no intervention abroad should be made lightly or with inflated expectations of success. The third lesson is that historical knowledge is essential in making and implementing foreign policy. Prior to their military involvement, Americans knew almost nothing about Vietnam -- and paid dearly for their ignorance. Dr. Herring emphasized that historical lessons are neither explicit nor universally applicable, but that in their absence "understanding is impossible."

ORIGINS OF THE AMERICAN WAR IN VIETNAM

False lessons from history played a pivotal role in the origins of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, as elucidated by Bruce Kuklick, the Nichols Professor of American History at the University of Pennsylvania. He began with a brief summary of the "standard story," or "quagmire thesis," which emphasizes the gradually escalating struggle against

communism in Indochina, first by the French, then the Americans, within the context of the Cold War. He was quick to point out that this view was not wrong, but suggested that a deeper understanding had to take into account both the global context and the dynamics of U.S. decision making.

At the center of Dr. Kuklick's argument is, perhaps surprisingly, the Cuban Missile Crisis. Throughout the 1950s, relations between the Soviets and the West failed to stabilize largely because of the proliferation of nuclear weapons, but also because of the inordinate Soviet fear of a rearmed West Germany. President Eisenhower had unwittingly exacerbated those fears by considering the provision of nuclear weapons to NATO and simultaneously reducing the U.S. presence in Europe. Dr. Kuklick suggested that the most important reason Nikita Khrushchev placed missiles in Cuba was to tell the United States, "You won't tolerate nuclear weapons in the hands of an irresponsible neighbor allied with your adversary, and neither will we."

In response to the missiles, Kennedy's Executive Committee drew up a strategy of "graduated escalation," which comprised measures ranging from the mild (negotiation) to the extreme (a major military strike, invasion), thus accepting the risk of apocalyptic war with the Soviet Union. When Khrushchev agreed to withdraw the missiles, the advisers concluded that the strategy not only worked, but validated their ostensibly rational decision-making process. But the Soviet leader was not reacting to the threat of graduated escalation, nor to Kennedy's secret offer to pull U.S. missiles out of Turkey. Rather, he removed the missiles after realizing that a nuclear exchange with superior U.S. forces would be suicidal. In the view of the ExCom members, however, it was their strategy that prevailed against the Soviet Union. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara even concluded that after Cuba strategy itself had given way to "crisis management." When the administration turned its attention to Southeast Asia, it was confident that the same methods that made the Russians "blink" would certainly cause Hanoi to stand down.

The other significant factor contributing to the U.S. war in Vietnam was Lyndon Johnson's relationship with Kennedy and his advisers. Dr. Kuklick argued that the Texan felt "culturally deprived" among the Kennedys and the East Coast elites around them and was unprepared to assume the responsibilities of the chief executive. Thus, in November 1963 he found himself both uncomfortable with and utterly reliant on the "Best and Brightest" he inherited from Kennedy. But whereas Kennedy was always skeptical of his Ivy League advisers and felt free to overrule them, Johnson pursued their logic to its inevitable result: the Americanization of the war in Vietnam.

LBJ AND STRATEGY

Lloyd Gardner, the Charles and Mary Beard Professor of History at Rutgers University, discerned two different military strategies during the Johnson presidency. The first, crisis management, resulted from the mistaken lessons of the Cuban missile crisis. The second, articulated by Gen. William C. Westmoreland, was attrition.

According to Dr. Gardner, the Johnson administration's strategy derived from the requirement that Vietnam not be allowed to derail the president's ambitious domestic goals. His aim, therefore, was simply not to lose. In 1964, McGeorge Bundy and McNamara told Johnson that the United States had to demonstrate its resolve to defend South Vietnam in order to convince the North Vietnamese of the futility of their campaign. Calibrated bombing and a battalion of U.S. troops were thought to be sufficient to signal Hanoi that its aggressive policy would spark a fight with the United States. The American leaders never foresaw 500,000 U.S. troops stationed in Vietnam, because they assumed that their opponents would never allow conflict with a global superpower to escalate so far.

The logic of graduated escalation proved fatefully restrictive. In early 1965 the United States began the air campaign known as Operation Rolling Thunder, and soon afterward the first antiwar protests began in the United States. Johnson responded to the protests by offering to include North Vietnam in a vast economic development plan for the entire region -- on the condition that North Vietnam leave the south in peace. The American public was largely mollified, but when Ho Chi Minh rebuffed the offer, the crisis management strategy forced the United States into a corner: either escalate or risk a complete loss of credibility. Within months, 100,000 troops were sent to Vietnam.

Gradually, as the hitherto widespread confidence in U.S. power eroded, leaders sought new ways to wage the war, although their goals and priorities remained unclear. In late 1965, for example, a bombing pause was ordered not for any strategic reason, but because the White House was about to seek more funds for the war from Congress. In January 1966 General Westmoreland began to pursue his new strategy of attrition in earnest. The object was not to win territory, but rather to inflict heavy casualties on the Viet Cong. But despite the disproportionate number of VC deaths and the drastically increased number of U.S. troops, the VC regained ground each time the U.S. pulled back.

In 1967, even after McNamara claimed that attrition would never work, other advisers still confidently told Johnson that leaving Vietnam would be disastrous. Their confidence lasted until the 1968 Tet Offensive finally convinced them (and Johnson) that a different solution was necessary. Johnson announced that he would not seek reelection, and General Abrams replaced Westmoreland as commander in Vietnam.

NIXON, KISSINGER, AND THE PARIS ACCORDS

Presenting himself as "a primary source, not a scholar," David Eisenhower, who is author of *Eisenhower at War* and teaches at the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania, spoke on the Nixon administration and the later years of the war. Perhaps ironically, the winner of the 1968 presidential election, in which the structure of peace in Vietnam was the single greatest issue of concern to voters, was not even interested in winning or losing the war in Vietnam per se. According to Mr. Eisenhower, Nixon and Kissinger always had their eyes on larger geopolitical goals. Vietnam was vital only insofar

as it prepared the way for the China opening, which, in turn, was important because it would end the status quo of the Cold War and provide the United States with greater latitude in foreign relations.

Nixon and Kissinger's goal in Vietnam was not to fight communist aggression, but to demonstrate U.S. commitment to its friends in Asia -- and its future friends, i.e., China. If China believed that the United States was a reliable partner, the meaning of winning or losing in Vietnam would change fundamentally, and pale in significance compared to the anticipated Cold War shift. Nixon and Kissinger believed that as long as the Cold War remained a test of Soviet and American military strength rather than economic or cultural vitality, the Soviet Union had much more to gain from the status quo than did the United States. This was because the bipolar system made politics a zero-sum game, so that the United States was constrained by its need to contest every communist advance around the world.

Both Nixon and Kissinger sought to end that bipolarity by exploiting the Sino-Soviet split. China, once drawn outside the sphere of the supposedly monolithic communist bloc, served as another counterweight to the Soviet Union. More importantly, an independent China belied the Soviet strength that had forced the Cold War to rest on the nuclear balance of terror. This shift made a communist victory in Vietnam -- or anywhere else -- largely irrelevant by exposing the "pretension of communist dynamism." Thus, Mr. Eisenhower concluded, U.S. success in the Cold War can actually be seen at least in part as a *result* of Nixon's method of liquidating the Vietnam War.

PROTEST AND MYTH

Adam Garfinkle, a senior fellow of FPRI, member of the National Security Study Group, and author of *Telltale Hearts: The Origins and Impact of the Vietnam Antiwar Movement*, discussed two of the most persistent myths about the Vietnam War.

The "hard hat" myth relied on the notion that protesters, the media, and civilian policymakers undermined political support and prevented a military victory in Vietnam by "keeping one hand tied behind our backs." This is wrong because the U.S. strategy was actually *counterproductive* to U.S. aims and increased the opponents' ranks. The Americans' attrition strategy forced Vietnamese peasants to choose sides -- and they mostly chose to fight the foreign invaders. "Untying the other hand" would only have exacerbated the situation.

The other myth was that the war was never winnable. This axiomatic statement often relies on the assumption that the adversaries' willingness to die rendered the attrition strategy ineffective. To others, the U.S. loss itself seems to prove that the war was unwinnable, a deterministic view that discounts the potential success of an alternative strategy. The myth of unwinnability is often invoked by those who claim that all antiwar protests were noble because they saved lives and reduced losses by expediting the war's end.

Both of these myths share the premise that the protests were effective -- which Dr. Garfinkle said was "just wrong," because it vastly overstates the domestic support enjoyed by the protesters. The antiwar movement, for example, did not cause Lyndon Johnson's March 1968 decision not to seek reelection. Indeed, widespread opposition to the war only grew after the U.S. government made clear that victory was no longer its aim, at which point the public concluded that the costs outweighed the objective.

To the extent that they had any impact at all, the most radical protest tactics actually *prolonged* the war. Referring to the phenomenon of the "negative follower group," Dr. Garfinkle argued that many Americans were so put off by the radical movement's rhetoric, tactics, and mores that they rallied behind the war effort. As a result of the backlash against the radicals, George Wallace briefly enjoyed national prominence, and two elections went to Richard Nixon. Had the Democratic Party not been so riven internally, a moderate nominee might have taken the White House. And as Dr. Garfinkle asked, "Who believes that a Humphrey administration would have fought the war for another four terrible years?"

Dr. Garfinkle drew four conclusions from the persistence of these myths. First, good intentions do not always result in good consequences. Second, facts and logic can rarely penetrate the "personal myths" of youth. Third, history is often interpreted with the needs of the present in mind. And finally, no side has a monopoly on mistaken interpretations.

VIETNAM PERCEPTIONS

Douglas Pike, research director of the Center for the Study of the Vietnam Conflict at Texas Tech University and a Foreign Service Officer in East Asia for thirty years, conveyed the need for teachers to expose students to competing perceptions of Vietnam and the war, rather than presenting them with hard and fast conclusions. This approach will not necessarily lead students to arrive at truth, but it should plant a wariness of untruth, which, he said, has a much greater impact.

Some perceptions, such as those concerning the nature and purposes of the war, are largely derivative of one's world view and therefore cannot be judged in objective terms. Others, regarding the course of battle or the influence of the press, for instance, are oriented toward fact and can be considered right or wrong in ways that philosophically based perceptions cannot. Dr. Pike also discussed several perceptions of the war's meaning and consequences. The war has been variously said to have destroyed the American social consensus as to the definition and goals of society, created a lasting distrust of Congress and the presidency, transformed naked aggression into a form of social progress, unleashed a global epidemic of violence in pursuit of political objectives, and demonstrated that American democracy is not suited to waging a protracted war. Alternatively, perhaps the war had little lasting meaning for the world after all, and other situations elsewhere have borne no important parallels to Vietnam.

Dr. Pike sought to have students sift through these perceptions to come as close as possible to truth, but advised

that the ambition may go unfulfilled. Quoting Hegel, he said, "We learn from history that we learn nothing from history."

WHAT SHOULD WE TEACH?

Walter A. McDougall and Paul Dickler concluded the conference by leading a panel discussion on teaching the Vietnam War. Dr. McDougall, who is the co-director of FPRI's History Academy, editor of *Orbis*, and the Alloy-Ansin Professor of History at the University of Pennsylvania, outlined two methods for approaching the war with students. The first is to provide an overview of the context and progression of events, then concentrate on key details in order to illuminate the major themes and dilemmas of the war. One might focus on the personal experiences of individual soldiers, specific battles and their significance to the changing course of the war, or key decisions and turning points.

An alternative would be to place Vietnam within larger historical contexts that could include, among others, the expansion of the Cold War containment strategy, great power relations, American domestic politics, the tradition of technocratic social science in American foreign relations, decolonization and the rise of nationalism in Asia, and the problems of waging a limited war. This approach has the advantage of imbuing the war with historical meaning and present-day relevance.

Dr. Dickler, a teacher of history and international relations at Neshaminy High School (Pa.) and a senior fellow of FPRI's Wachman Fund for International Education, presented curriculum materials that he has used to teach Vietnam to his own students, and emphasized his desire for students to confront the issues within the social context of the time. He also discussed the problem of teaching a subject in which he was directly involved. He introduces the topic by urging his students to be aware of his biases.

Following the presentations, all participants had the opportunity to raise specific questions about introducing the war to students who often have only vague, second-hand knowledge of it. Many educators, of course, have first-hand knowledge, and a discussion arose as to the difficulty and importance of bringing personal experiences to the subject. Students often find teachers' memories of their own involvement compelling, but at the same time teachers may be wary of serving as primary sources. Participants also shared opinions and advice regarding history texts, fiction, songs, poetry, films, and other resources they have used in the classroom. Although none of the resources received a unanimous endorsement, a common sentiment was the need for students to confront materials (especially films and Internet sources) critically.

The value of a critical approach was the weekend's most frequent refrain. From the persistent biases and myths to the perilous attempt to discern hard "lessons" amidst incomplete evidence and vivid memory, the speakers underscored the need to regard black-and-white conclusions with suspicion and to gain, in the shades of gray afforded by historical investigation, a tentative but nuanced understanding. Perhaps the most striking feature of the entire gathering was the breadth of agreement among the speakers, despite their differences -- a far cry from the rancorous debate that characterized the war years. As Dr. McDougall pointed out, "The war caused passionate divisions precisely because people on all sides had reason to believe themselves either morally or pragmatically right." The passage of time and the progress of historical scholarship have brought both more knowledge and less certainty, and that combination has widened the area of common understanding. On a weekend twenty-five years after the fall of Saigon and thirty years after the deaths at Kent State, a war opponent could sit with a veteran and say, "We largely agree about Vietnam, its history, and its legacy. For people who've done some serious thinking, reading, and research about it, it's not such a very big gap." The one question no one had to raise was *why* we teach about the Vietnam War.

Stephen Winterstein is managing editor of FPRI's world affairs journal Orbis and previously taught at international schools in Switzerland, Singapore, and Thailand.

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Directed by Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Walter A. McDougall, FPRI's History Academy is a research and education program that relates the teaching of history to the question of Western identity. Other conference-related documents, available upon request, include: "Teaching the Vietnam War," by Walter McDougall; "The Lessons of Vietnam," by George Herring; "Vietnam: A Pop Quiz," by Adam Garfinkle; "Mythed Opportunities: The Truth about the Vietnam Antiwar Protests," by Adam Garfinkle; and "The Vietnamization of America," by Walter McDougall. Previous History Institutes covered: Multiculturalism in World History (keynoted by William McNeill); The Cold War Revisited (keynoted by John Lewis Gaddis); Two Hundred Years of American Foreign Policy (keynoted by Walter McDougall); Teaching History: How and Why (keynoted by Gordon Wood); and America and the Idea of the West (keynoted by William McNeill). Next year's History Institute will focus on "Teaching World Religions." To support the work of the History Academy, contact Alan Luxenberg at fpri@fpri.org or call 215-732-3774, ext. 105.